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Could you teach new tricks to old dogs? An analysis of online communication of political leaders in Spanish regional elections

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Two regional elections were held in 2022, marking the start of a new electoral phase in Spain. The first election was held in February in Castilla y León, where the right-wing VOX party formed a coalition government with the right-wing Partido Popular for the first time. At the same time, the far-left party Podemos saw its parliamentary representation significantly reduced. Subsequently, in June, Andalusia held its elections, in which VOX increased its representation by two seats, marking the beginning of its rise at the national electoral level. Conversely, the extreme left, split between two parties, saw its representation decline, losing 10 seats. This study attempts to juxtapose the electoral strategies employed by the leaders of the different political parties, with a particular focus on the communication strategies of leaders and parties on X (formerly Twitter) throughout the campaign period. It is expected that discrepancies will emerge not only between political entities, but also between regions. To investigate this hypothesis, we conducted a content analysis of X accounts, selecting those associated with regional presidential candidates within each region. We distinguish between those considered 'traditional' political parties and those considered 'new', including in these two categories the main contending political parties in each region. Thanks to the analysis, the proposed objective is achieved, demonstrating the existing differences between the two types of political parties and how their leaders use the social platform X. The results show that all the elements considered in the study are present, although not uniformly across both regions analyzed. This suggests a progressive alignment between new and traditional parties, reflecting a convergence in their strategies for conducting electoral campaigns.

KEYWORDS

political parties, political communication, electoral strategies, emotions, content analysis, social networks

1 Introduction

Political parties are the primary actors in the representation of interests within democratic societies (Luna et al., 2021). The system of aggregating citizen preferences is structured around the parties, and the legitimacy of the democratic system is contingent upon the parties' capacity to formulate proposals that respond to the needs of the citizenry. However, political parties are not immutable entities. The contemporary political parties are markedly different from those that emerged with the democratization of liberal systems at the end of the 19th

century, and even from those of just a decade ago. The evolution of political parties has been shaped by the social, cultural, and economic changes that have characterized the history of societies. Notable recent changes include the growing partisan dealignment (Megías, 2020), the intensification of the individualization process characteristic of modern societies (Collier and Kay, 2020), the emergence of an antiestablishment discourse that undermines the credibility of representative democracy (Mair, 2013; Megías and Moreno, 2022), and the new dynamics, media, and scenarios of communication and information exchange. In this context, the Internet has precipitated a communicative revolution, altering the forms of interaction between political parties, elites, and voters. Traditional political parties have demonstrated difficulties in adapting to this new environment, facilitating the emergence of new political parties (Barberà et al., 2019; Lobera and Portos, 2021).

The emergence of these new parties is characterized by their development within a digital environment, which has not only revolutionized the adoption of new media and interaction and communication techniques, but also given rise to a renewed conception of political representation. This is characterized by adaptability, interactivity, transparency, disintermediation and instantaneousness in relations with citizens (Lobera and Portos, 2021). These parties are led primarily by individuals who have been socialized in the digital age. They view the Internet not only as a technological innovation but also as a structuring medium of contemporary societies.

Considering the framework, the present research endeavors to examine the digital electoral campaign of parties, with a particular focus on comparing the performance of traditional parties with that of new parties, which have been identified as platform parties (Deseriis, 2020). The study employs a comparative analysis across two distinct geographical contexts: Castilla y León and Andalucía. This allows for an investigation of territorial differences. The variation in content and presence on the social network X (formerly known as Twitter) of the publications of the leaders of the main parties during the electoral campaign is analyzed based on the coding adapted from European Parliament: Directorate-General for Communication et al. (2019). This analysis is presented in the context of previous research on the subject, including studies by Cárdenas Domínguez (2020) and Conover et al. (2021). The present study focuses on a content analysis of the social networks of political leaders, understood as the main candidates of each party. The content posted by the parties in general is excluded from the scope of this study. Considering the increasing politicization of the role of the President, the content shared on the personal social media accounts of political leaders has assumed greater relevance to the public than that of the political parties themselves (Zamir, 2024).

This study compares the regions of Andalusia and Castilla y León. The two regions are the most populous in Spain; however, their economic and demographic structures exhibit significant disparities. Andalusia is one of the largest and most populated regions in Spain. Its economy is oriented towards agriculture, tourism and industry. Furthermore, it has a political tradition that has been marked by decades of Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) domination until recently. Castilla y León is a less populated community with a strong rural bias and a history of regional government dominated by the Partido Popular (PP). Furthermore, both elections occurred against the backdrop of significant shifts in the Spanish political landscape. The fragmentation of the party system, the growth of new players such as Vox -which established itself as a significant political force, marking

a departure from the conventional approach to regional governance and potentially influencing the formation of future national coalitions-or Ciudadanos, and the redefinition of the positions of the PP and PSOE reflect a transformation of the political system as a whole (Montabes Pereira et al., 2023; Ortega, 2023; Pérez-Castaños et al., 2023). In addition to the existence of political differences, the two regions also exhibit notable dissimilarities in their socioeconomic and demographic fabric. Therefore, Andalusia is characterized by high unemployment rates and an economic structure that is more dependent on tourism and agriculture (Álvarez-Montoya and Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2024). This is in stark contrast to Castile and León, where population ageing and rural depopulation are significant concerns (Bello Paredes, 2020).

The objective of this study is to identify and analyze the differences in digital communication strategies between leaders of traditional political parties and those who emerged after the Great Recession. This study will examine the influence of leaders' presence in digital campaigns and their specific role in these campaigns. Furthermore, the emotional dimension of these leaders' communication will be examined to identify discrepancies that facilitate a more accurate comprehension of the influence of these elements on digital campaigns. The article is structured in addition to this brief introduction into five more sections. The following section delineates the materials and methodology to be employed, delineating the type of material to be analyzed, the analytical approach, the research objectives and hypotheses, and the methodology to be utilized throughout the paper. The third section presents the data collected, preceded by a brief contextual and electoral explanation of its collection. The fourth section engages with existing academic literature to contextualize the data analyzed and to elucidate the objectives of the analysis. The conclusions will also explore potential future avenues of enquiry for the research team.

2 Materials and method

This section will provide a detailed account of the data collection process, and the subsequent coding carried out. Similarly, the objectives of this research and the hypotheses that will be tested will be discussed. In conclusion, the methodology that will be employed to attain the stated objectives will be delineated in detail.

2.1 Collected materials

To conduct the proposed analysis, it was essential to monitor the social media accounts of the principal political parties participating in the regional elections in Castilla y León and Andalusia. Because of the disparate dates on which the elections were held, the acronyms of some of these parties do not correspond with one another. Therefore, the so-called "national level" parties retain their distinctive acronyms in both electoral contexts. This includes the conservative PP, the social democratic PSOE, the liberal party Ciudadanos (Cs), and the radical right-wing populist party VOX, which all have the same acronym in both regions.

The various political parties positioned to the left of social democracy exhibit a notable variation in the acronyms used to describe them, depending on the specific territorial context. In Castilla y León, the left-wing political spectrum is primarily represented by

Podemos and Izquierda Unida, which together form the electoral coalition Unidas Podemos (hereafter referred to as UP). At the time of the elections, this coalition held national power, participating in a coalition government with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE).

However, the political landscape in Andalusia presents a distinct situation. In the 2018 elections, the electoral coalition Adelante Andalucía (hereafter AA)—comprising Podemos and Anticapitalistas—was the sole left-wing party to the left of the PSOE. By 2022, however, the political scenario had shifted significantly. A division occurred within the party, stemming from the allocation of parliamentary seats in 2021, which has since resulted in a formal split. The Anticapitalistas faction, having separated from Podemos, continues to operate under the AA acronym. Meanwhile, Podemos, alongside other left-wing parties, has established a new coalition under the name Por Andalucía (hereafter PORA).

Furthermore, in the context of Castilla y León, there are additional regionalist or provincialist political organizations. These include the Unión del Pueblo Leonés (UPL), a regionalist party represented in three constituencies of the Autonomous Community; the provincial party Por Ávila (XA); the various platforms of the España Vaciada (EV), present in four constituencies of the Autonomous Community; and Soria ¡YA! (SY) is primarily concerned with the interests of the province of Soria.

In light of these considerations, it is pertinent to highlight that our analysis only encompasses the official accounts and social media activity of each candidate for the regional presidency. The social network X has been selected for its impact as a tool for political communication, rather than as a predictor of electoral outcomes (McGregor et al., 2017). Similarly, the level of interaction facilitated by X is higher than that of Facebook, primarily due to the ability to open parallel avenues of debate (Bossetta and Schmøkel, 2022). Consequently, the social network X has been identified as the most appropriate platform for conducting this analysis. Accordingly, a total of 6,016 posts have been collected, of which 1,899 originate from Castilla y León and 4,117 from Andalucía. The mere enumeration of the posts reveals a significant discrepancy between the two

Autonomous Communities. Given the paucity of political parties in Andalusia, the utilization of X is more pervasive during the Andalusian campaign than during the Castile and León election campaign. This may be attributed, among other factors, to the demographic and age distribution of the Castile and Leon population being more dispersed than that of Andalusia (Bello Paredes, 2020). However, it could also be a strategic decision by the territorial management of the parties based on the contextual reality or a decision made by the candidates themselves. Therefore, it can be inferred that the penetration of social networks may have been less significant, whereas the use of traditional campaign formats, such as television and radio advertisements or face-to-face interactions, may have been more prominent.

Considering the research's overarching aim to ascertain the contrasts in communication between the contemporary and traditional parties and given the monograph's concentration about leadership, it is imperative to adapt the analytical content. Consequently, of the 6,016 posts in X that were coded between the accounts of the political parties and the candidates for the regional presidencies, only 344 in Castilla y León and 1,025 in Andalucía were retained for analysis, resulting in a total of 1,369 posts in X for the following pages.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of analyzed content by region and political party. Due to limitations in space and the analytical capacity of the data, the results do not include all political parties. However, traditional and new parties were grouped together for the sake of clarity, as will be explained in subsequent sections.

2.2 Coding

The codebook by European Parliament: Directorate-General for Communication et al. (2019), originally designed for the European electoral campaign, has been adapted for the coding of the materials in X. This manual has been modified to align with a distinct territorial context, integrating elements and themes more pertinent to the electoral arena under examination. Similarly, the measurement parameters have

TABLE 1 Posts in X per region and political party.

Region	Type of Pol. party	Party acronym	N of posts
		PP	42
	Traditional	PSOE	52
		UPL	9
Castilla and León		VOX	29
	New	UP	70
		Cs	115
		EV	27
Andalusia	Traditional	PP	175
	Traditional	PSOE	140
		VOX	188
	New	PORA	181
		AA	341
		CS	0

Source: Own elaboration.

been modified to align them with the specific characteristics of the Spanish political context¹. The coding has been previously validated in several publications, including a case study of the Castilla y León elections of 2022 (Pérez-Castaños et al., 2023) and a comparative analysis of parties located at the extremes of the ideological spectrum, covering both these elections and the Andalusian elections (Pérez-Castaños and Ruiloba-Núñez, 2023).

The coding was manually conducted by using Google Forms, whereby the analyzed materials were linked for future reference. Subsequently, the data were exported to formats compatible with statistical analysis programs, such as SPSS and R, which permitted the merging of both databases despite having been collected at different times, thus facilitating comparative analysis.

As is standard practice in this field of research, the coding was validated by the authors themselves. The initial coding was conducted by technicians who had received specific training for this task. To ensure the accuracy and consistency of the coding, a random sample of 15% of the materials was selected for recoding 3 months after the original coding. The consistency between the codings was evaluated using Cohen's Kappa index, for which the following equation is provided (Cohen, 1960):

$$K = \frac{\left(P_0 - P_e\right)}{\left(1 - P_e\right)}$$

In this context, P0 represents the observed relative agreement between observers, while Pe denotes the hypothetical probability of agreement by chance. The objective is to calculate the probabilities that each observer randomly ranks each category using the observed data. In the event of complete consensus among the raters, K is equal to 1. In the event of no agreement among the raters, other than that which would be expected by chance, K is equal to zero. In this case, a result of 0.87 has been obtained, indicating that there is no deviation in the coding process.

2.3 Objectives and hypothesis

As outlined in the introduction to this research, the primary objective of this article is to examine the discrepancies in the communicative strategies employed by leaders of the new and traditional parties during the electoral campaign for the 2022 regional elections in Spain. It is anticipated that the analysis will reveal discrepancies between these two typologies of political parties, which will be examined in greater depth in the following section, as well as between the regions under investigation.

The data collected, along with the subsequent coding and analysis, permit the research to be structured into two parts. The

initial phase of the study will entail a comparative analysis of the distribution of the campaign across the elements between the two Autonomous Communities. The second part of the study will examine the emotional and rational aspects of the campaign in social networks. It will compare the differences between autonomous communities and within each one, differentiating between new and traditional political parties. This approach will enable us to assess the following hypotheses:

H1: New political parties have a greater presence on social networks than traditional parties.

In accordance with the findings of European Parliament: Directorate-General for Communication et al. (2019) and Pérez-Castaños et al. (2022), it can be discerned that, despite the absence of notable discrepancies in the utilization of social networks across the various political parties, the campaigns of emerging parties tend to prioritize social media platforms over conventional campaign strategies, such as billboards, television advertisements, and print media advertisements. This approach enables them to reach a broader and more diverse electorate, engage directly with voters, and disseminate their message in a prompt and efficacious manner. Moreover, social networks provide these parties with the opportunity to disseminate content virally and to mobilize their followers in a dynamic and participatory manner.

H2: Traditional political parties, due to the nature of their organizational structures, tend to exhibit a less personalized approach to their campaign activities in comparison to newer political parties.

Traditional parties, with established organizational structures and a presence throughout the territory, are less reliant on the figure of their leaders for the campaign. To assess the degree of personalization in leaders' communication on social networks, the ratio of posts about themselves versus other party figures will be examined. Prior research, as exemplified by Scott and Rains (2020), suggests that the personalization of leaders is more pronounced in new parties. Furthermore, it is imperative to investigate the way candidates are presented, as recent literature indicates that populist radical right and populist left parties (Bast, 2021; Pallarés-Navarro and Zugasti, 2022) endeavor to portray a professional image while presenting themselves as more approachable, expressive, and emotional than candidates from other parties. A similar argument can be made with regard to platform parties, which are typically more centralized, with the figure of the leader assuming a particularly significant role (Deseriis, 2020).

H3: The newly formed political parties are expected to utilize a greater proportion of negative and confrontational rhetoric in their electoral campaigns.

Notwithstanding the endeavors of parties situated at the ideological extremes to temper their rhetoric in a bid to appeal to a more diverse electorate (Scott and Rains, 2020; Borbáth and Gessler, 2023), they persist in employing distinctive tactics in their communicative strategies, including the appeal to emotions and to the identity of their traditional bases. This phenomenon implies a dialectic that seeks to balance the expansion of their audience with the preservation of their core support (Vittori, 2020; Peña and Gold, 2023).

¹ The dataset as well as the codebook and interpretation materials are to be found in ZENODO: https://zenodo.org/records/13624697?token=eyJhbG ciOiJIUzUxMiJ9.eyJpZCI6IJY4NDVmYzQ1LWJlYTAtNDAyMS04Njg4LTM1N WQxOTEwZjU3ZSIsImRhdGEiOnt9LCJyYW5kb20iOilwMThjYTliOWUwNjUyZjk wMzY2Nzk2Mzc5YzAyY2M4MSJ9.H47XACall54MM9B2vM5A_exvdTAe-QFHJcK qmUj5v24ZMJldBWDPQl9-DeJ0LwRSe6VKctEV2ZUBgh3308hOg.

H4: The utilization of emotional content will be less prevalent among traditional party leaders.

Because Spain is among the most affectively polarized societies (Gidron et al., 2020), it seems reasonable to posit that the use of emotional content will predominate in electoral campaigns. This phenomenon is particularly pertinent in the context of the commencement of a new electoral cycle in the country. Moreover, several scholars have demonstrated that emotional content is more prevalent in political parties that espouse extreme ideologies (Pallarés-Navarro and Zugasti, 2022; González-Castro, 2023). This phenomenon is evidenced by the way radical left parties appeal to the emotions of their supporters, utilizing messages that aim to foster a more profound emotional connection and mobilize their base of support through intense feelings such as indignation, hope, and solidarity. In contrast, radical right parties tend to prioritize messages based on reason and fear, as well as security. In this regard, the objective of our research is to ascertain whether this phenomenon also manifests itself in the Spanish context, thereby confirming the results observed in other studies and political scenarios (Vasilopoulou and Wagner, 2022; González-Castro, 2023). By examining the content of contemporary electoral campaigns, it is anticipated that the messages of radical left parties will exhibit a greater prevalence of emotional content. This would facilitate a more profound comprehension of the communicative strategies deployed by these parties in comparison to their radical right counterparts.

The analysis of these aspects will allow us to identify whether there is a common pattern in the campaigns of the new political parties and to delineate the main differences in campaign strategies between them and traditional parties. The results indicate that the proposed elements are present, although not consistently across both regions. This suggests a gradual convergence between new and traditional parties, with a growing similarity in their electoral campaign strategies. Nevertheless, to ascertain the existence of such a convergence or, as Lilleker et al. (2011) put it, an equalization in the campaign model, it is essential to conduct a longitudinal analysis.

2.4 Methodology

The analysis to be developed in this research will be descriptive in nature, covering a double perspective already mentioned. On the one hand, a comparison will be made between the Autonomous Communities of Andalusia and Castilla y León, territories with marked socioeconomic and political differences. The way the electorate engages with political figures on social media varies across different regions, which may have implications for the design of an online communication strategy. In Andalusia, where social media usage is more prevalent due to higher urbanization and a younger population, leaders may have chosen to engage in more consistent, participatory and dynamic interactions, encouraging debates and prompt responses (Ceballos del Cid, 2024). In Castilla y León, where the public is more numerous and may have less presence on certain platforms, interactions may have been more limited, influencing the type of content shared -less focused on generating participation and more on transmitting clear and direct messages- (Lava-Santos et al., 2023). On the other, the strategies of the leaders of the traditional parties and of the new parties in X will be examined to identify, in accordance with the hypotheses proposed, whether there are significant differences between the two groups.

It is first necessary to define the distinction between new parties and traditional parties. Despite the lack of consensus in the literature on a precise definition of emerging political parties as a distinct evolutionary category, it is evident that the profound socio-cultural and economic changes that have occurred in recent decades in the West have significantly altered the relationships between parties, elites, and voters. In the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis, several new political parties emerged, influenced by the social changes that occurred during this period. These parties span a range of positions within the ideological spectrum. Nevertheless, a common characteristic of these parties is the espousal of an anti-establishment rhetoric that erodes the legitimacy of representative democracy (Mair, 2013) and the integration of novel forms and avenues for communication and information dissemination.

In contrast to traditional mass parties, the newer parties have a markedly smaller membership base, which gives rise to a heightened economic reliance on public resources or external agents, such as large companies. Moreover, their organizational structures are typically more streamlined, with a notable absence of the network of physical meeting spaces between members and leaders (Fitzpatrick and Thuermer, 2023). In contrast, catch-all parties have chosen to eschew their traditional stances to appeal to a more diverse sociological spectrum. This shift has led to a de-emphasis on ideological concerns and a prioritization of cross-cutting, universally relevant issues in their electoral platforms.

In this context of adaptation to new social conditions (Barberà et al., 2021), a new type of political party has emerged, known as the platform party. These parties are characterized by a strong reliance on digital technology for their organization, communication, and functioning (Fitzpatrick and Thuermer, 2023). This party modality introduces novel forms of political organization and communication, as well as values and social relations that are more aligned with a networked society (Vittori, 2020). Platform parties are distinguished by their intensive use of digital platforms for the dissemination of information, the creation of communities with their followers, and the interaction with other political, media, and social actors. The dynamics of interaction on social networks are characterized by a preference for brevity and message appeal, which are crucial for achieving virality (Deseriis, 2020). Furthermore, these parties are in alignment with the increasing individualism observed in contemporary society, replacing traditional face-to-face assemblies with online consultations and discussions on digital platforms. Nevertheless, this mode of interaction is distinguished by its impersonality, with technological devices serving as the primary medium.

In the context under examination, the distinction between traditional and new parties is clearly delineated. Accordingly, the accounts of the leaders of the PSOE and the PP in both Autonomous Communities, as well as that of the UPL party in Castilla y León, which was established in 1986, will be classified as "Traditional Parties." In contrast, the remainder of the parties will be designated as "New Parties," given that they all emerged after the Great Recession and have since established a robust electoral presence in the second decade of the 21st century.

3 Results

3.1 Electoral context

Prior to undertaking an analysis of the results of the content analysis of the electoral campaign, it is valuable to provide a brief overview of the electoral processes that took place in Castilla y León in February 2022 and in Andalusia in June of the same year. As previously stated, the parties analyzed in this research have already been commented on in the preceding section.

In the case of Castilla y León, a total of 27 political parties were presented with the objective of representing the diverse political interests across the nine provinces that comprise the region. Due to unequal implantation, as previously mentioned, a total of 12 of the 27 parties were selected, representing 44.44% of the parties. This was done in accordance with the findings of the demoscopic research, which indicated that these parties had greater potential to obtain representation. Similarly, in the case of Andalusia, there were also 27 candidacies that, with unequal geographical implantation, competed in the elections of June 2022. As previously stated, our analysis has focused on a subset of six parties, representing 22.22% of the total. Of these, five secured representations in the Andalusian parliament.

As evidenced by the electoral results detailed in Table 2, the selection of parties in both contexts is deemed adequate, as all except EV obtained representation in their respective regional parliaments. As previously stated, the results demonstrate that the parties in question are of particular significance for the purposes of our research. Likewise, the data assist in understanding the relative position of each party, with the three leading parties remaining consistent across both territories. Additionally, the data elucidate the weight of the new parties in comparison to the traditional ones, which collectively account for over 60% of the vote in both regions.

3.2 Content analysis

This section will be divided into three distinct sections, each with a particular focus on a specific issue. However, before undertaking an analysis of the issues, it is first necessary to present the content published by each of the party types on the X social network. Figure 1 illustrates that, of the total number of materials analyzed for each of the Autonomous Communities, more than two-thirds have been posted by new parties. This figure is 70.1% for Castilla y León and 69.3% for Andalucía.

Given the clear distinction between the candidates of the new and traditional parties as evidenced by the data in Figure 1, it is now appropriate to begin an examination of the elements analyzed to respond to our hypotheses. The initial focus will be on the aspects of leadership pertaining to appearance, image, and expression. Subsequently, an investigation will be conducted into the nature of the content posted, specifically whether it is negative or satirical in tone. Finally, the presence of emotional and rational content in the leaders' posts will be analyzed.

3.2.1 The expression of leadership

In the context of electoral campaigns, candidates typically utilize their networks to disseminate content featuring their participation in campaign events or statements (Pérez-Castaños et al., 2023). Furthermore, on numerous occasions, they are accompanied by other political leaders at the various levels of government. Figure 2 presents a summary of the data regarding the presence of leaders in the content posted on X by the analyzed candidates, including the instances where leaders appeared and who they were.

The initial observation is that, in contrast to the findings of Pérez-Castaños et al. (2023) regarding the Facebook and X accounts of political parties, where over 80% of the content featured the leaders, when solely the accounts of the candidates are examined, this percentage declines significantly. As was the case in Figure 1, the data

TABLE 2 Electoral results in Castilla y Leon and Andalusia.

Political party	Castilla y	Leon	Andalusia		
	Vote percentage	Seats	Vote percentage	Seats	
PP	31.4	31	43.1	58	
PSOE	30	28	24.1	30	
VOX	17.6	13	13.5	14	
UP	5.1	1	-	-	
PORA	-	-	7.7	5	
AA	-	-	4.6	2	
Cs	4.5	1	3.3	0	
UPL ^a	4.3	3	-	-	
EV ^b	1.6	0	-	-	
SY ^c	1.6	3	-	-	
XAV ^d	1.1	1	-	-	

[&]quot;The percentage represents the whole region. In the circumscriptions that they were fighting the results were 21.3, 1 and 2.7%, obtaining representatives just in the first one.

^bThe only overcame the electoral threshold – 3% of the valid votes- in one of them (5.6%), in the rest they obtained 2.8, 1.9 and 1.6%.

[&]quot;They obtained up to 42.7% of the valid vote in the only circumscription they had lists.

^dThey got a 16.7% of the vote in the circumscription they were competing

Source: own elaboration with data from the Consejerías de Presidencia.

in Figure 2 demonstrate comparable trends based on region. The key differentiating factor is whether the parties in question are new or traditional. In both cases, a difference of approximately 20 percentage points is observed in favor of the new parties, with the presence of leaders accounting for approximately 60% of the analyzed content. This challenges the prevailing trend in the literature towards hyper leadership (Pérez Curiel, 2020; Pereira et al., 2021) and demonstrates that the role of the leader is more significant in new parties than in traditional ones.

The leader does not always appear alone; rather, they seek to approach other figures to "take advantage of" them due to a variety of factors. For example, the leader may seek to ally with a popular figure among their electorate, or with an individual who can influence undecided voters. Therefore, it can be observed that when leaders appear accompanied, they do so with allies in most cases. However, it is notable that in the case of the Andalusian parties, they tend to present other individuals in their posts. In the case of the new parties in this region, 6% of the materials analyzed indicate the presence of opponents or a combination of allies and opponents in the posts in question. This proclivity may be elucidated subsequently, during the examination of content that is either satirical or adversarial in nature.

Furthermore, in the context of a campaign, the outcome is rarely the result of mere chance. For this reason, the facial expressions of the leaders and their attire are also subjects worthy of examination when analyzing electoral campaigns (Petersson McIntyre, 2021). Similarly, the aesthetic presentation of the candidates, both collectively and individually, should be subjected to analysis. This is because such presentation helps to project an image to the public that is linked to specific attributes, such as seriousness, management skills, or a sense of proximity (Boussalis et al., 2021). Figure 3 illustrates the way the candidates in X present themselves when appearing in public.

Prior to commenting on the data, it is important to note that the coding was conducted based on four distinct categories of attire. These correspond to the following categories: The "formal" category encompasses individuals attired in a jacket and tie, a jacket and blouse/ shirt, and the absence of cotton garments, neutral colors, and other characteristics. The "semi-formal" category includes individuals attired in a jacket without a tie, a shirt or blouse without a jacket, and the absence of cotton garments, neutral colors, and other characteristics. The "casual" category includes individuals who do not wear a jacket or tie or who wear brighter colors, among other characteristics. The "more than one attire" category includes individuals who appear on the poster in different attire. Given the differences in attire between men and women, these categories are designed to be as comprehensive as possible.

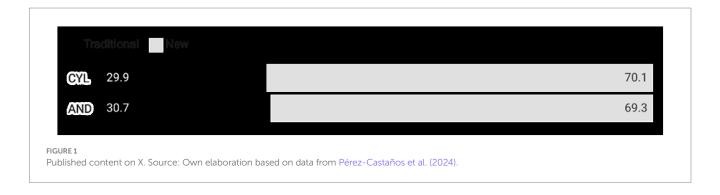
Figure 3 illustrates that, in the case of Andalusia, candidates tend to dress more formally than those in Castile and León. In this instance, a discernible divergence emerges between the candidates representing established political parties and those representing newer, emerging parties. Those affiliated with traditional political parties tend to adhere to a broader range of formal and semi-formal dress codes. In the case of Castilla y León, 4.8% of the leaders present in content posted by traditional candidates and 70.2% of those present in content posted by candidates of traditional parties exhibited the characteristics. In Andalucía, the corresponding figures were 23.7 and 45.9%. In both cases, the proportion of leaders who appear in this way is more than or around 70%. Nevertheless, leaders of new parties tend to present themselves in a more informal manner, which is the most common category in both territories, with 41.9% of cases in candidates of new parties in Castilla y León and 48.8% in those of Andalusia.

Following an examination of the subject of clothing, the third and final observation will concentrate on the facial expressions displayed by the leaders in question. Figure 4 reflects the data, which has been categorized into four typologies. The expression can be classified as "neutral" when the faces that appear have a majestic expression, attempting to refrain from conveying any emotion. The expression is "angry or worried" when the face exhibits a constricted grimace, pursed lips, and other similar characteristics. It is "friendly or smiling" when the face displays a genuine appearance of friendliness or smiling. Finally, the expression is "funny" when the face makes a comical grimace, displays mockery, and other similar behaviors.

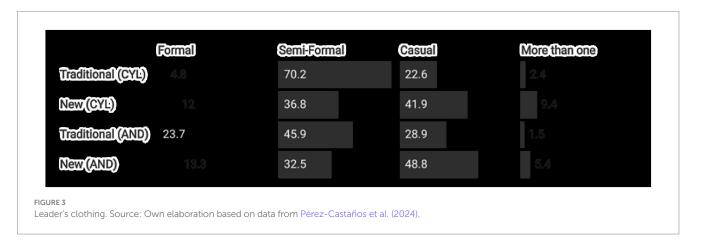
The data presented in Figure 4 do not demonstrate a discernible distinction between traditional and new party candidates. While there are certain trends that may be worthy of further investigation, such as the observation that candidates of traditional parties tend to display more neutral and amused facial expressions, while those of new parties appear more concerned and smiling. However, the differences in some cases are minimal and should not be used to make broad generalizations. It can be observed that there is a discernible regional difference, with candidates from Andalusia displaying a more genial demeanor, while those from Castilla y León exhibit a more majestic expression.

3.2.2 Attack and humor

Having verified the appearance of the candidates and other political leaders, it is now necessary to ascertain whether the content published on X by the candidates of the traditional and new parties in the electoral campaigns in Castile and León and Andalusia has employed negative, aggressive, or satirical tactics towards their opponents in the electoral arena, other political parties, or other entities, the specifics of which will be outlined subsequently. As







illustrated in Figure 5, the utilization of negative advertising is more prevalent than the deployment of humor. This aligns with the findings of García Hípola et al. (2021) regarding the 2019 European elections, which indicated that the use of humor was an infrequent strategy during that electoral campaign. Furthermore, there is no evidence indicating a proclivity towards employing either an aggressive or a humorous approach. Instead, this strategy appears to be more prevalent among the newer political entities in Castilla y León and the more established ones in Andalusia.

It is unclear, however, who is the intended audience of these negative and humorous content. Figures 6, 7 provide a summary of the various targets that are subjected to negative or satirical commentary. To this end, the same categories have been devised for the regional, national, and foreign levels. The categories are as follows: political parties, political leaders, governmental institutions, the media, and the public. As illustrated in Figure 6, the most prevalent targets are regional parties and associations, which are situated at the same level as the electoral process.

As illustrated in Figure 6, the negative content of the X posts by candidates representing new parties appears to target individuals with greater frequency than those representing traditional parties. In both Castilla y León and Andalusia, the discrepancy is greater than 10 percentage points, with 20% of the negative attack content pertaining to the traditional parties in the former case and 30.3% in the latter, and 15.8% of the negative attack content associated with the traditional parties in the former case and 24% in the latter pertaining to the new parties in Andalusia.

Ultimately, despite the absence of notable instances of humor or satire, Figure 7 illustrates the orientation of this content within the same categories as in Figure 6. In contrast with the preceding case, no discernible trend is evident in this instance. In both territories, satire is directed at regional leaders and candidates, as well as their respective parties and coalitions, by both traditional and new parties.

3.2.3 Emotion and rationality

This final section of data analysis encompasses all aspects related to emotionality, rationality, and the presence of negative and humorous content on social networks during the campaign. The initial analysis will focus on the examination of the presence of emotional, rational, and neutral content, organized according to the party in question. Subsequently, Figures 8, 9 will analyze, respectively, the types of emotionality and rationality exhibited in the content (see Table 3).

As can be observed, once again there is no discernible trend between the X content of the candidates of the new political parties and those of the traditional parties, with emotional content being the most salient for all but the traditional parties of Castilla y León. In this case, the most prevalent stance is neutrality, which accounts for 52.6% of the content. In contrast, the X accounts of the leaders of the traditional Andalusian parties demonstrate a notable prevalence of emotional content, with 83.8% of the content falling into this category. In contrast, the new parties in Castilla y León exhibit a greater degree of emotional content (58.5%) than their traditional counterparts, a trend that is not observed in Andalusia. Indeed, the new parties exhibit a notable degree of homogeneity in their utilization of

	Smiling/Friendly	Worried/Angry	Neutral	Funny
Traditional (CYL)	21.4	21.4	56	
New (CYL)	37.6	23.9	38.5	
Traditional (AND)	51.9	17.3	27.8	
New (AND)	51.2	28.9	19.4	

FIGURE 4
Facial expression. Source: Own elaboration based on data from Pérez-Castaños et al. (2024).



emotional, rational, and neutral content. The latter is the least prevalent, accounting for 34.6% of the total content.

To elaborate further, Figure 8 refers to the type of emotion that these parties represent in their materials. A total of eight discrete emotional states have been quantified: entertainment, anger, compassion, empathy/sympathy, enthusiasm, fear, pride, and wellbeing. Anger and fear are classified as negative emotions, whereas the remaining emotions are considered positive. It should be noted that, in the cases under analysis, no messages linked to fear were identified and thus do not appear in the figure.

A preliminary observation of the data reveals that the emotional expressions of the leaders of the new political parties exhibit a greater diversity than those of the leaders of the traditional parties. In the case of the latter, the most common emotions are empathy (11.1% in Castilla y León and 23% in Andalusia), enthusiasm (77.8 and 34.4%, respectively), and pride (11.1 and 23%). In the Andalusia case, wellbeing (19.7%) is also present. In this case, the traditional parties only evince positive emotions. This contrasts with the accounts of the candidates of the new parties, which evince a broader range of emotions. These include anger, which is present in 4.3% of the content of the new parties in Castilla y León and 2.8% in the Andalusian ones, and sadness, which is present in Castilla y León only, at 4.3% of the content of these new political forces. These data demonstrate a trend that is strikingly like that previously examined by Pérez-Castaños and Ruiloba-Núñez (2023) about the new left and right-wing parties in these territories.

Ultimately, while this was the least utilized by all parties, Figure 9 differentiates between six rational elements to underscore:

competence, concrete data, consistency, fairness, knowledge, and trust. As can be observed, there is no discernible trend between the content of new and traditional political parties. However, as was the case in Figure 8, it appears that the X posts of new party candidates tend to offer a more diverse range of content. The content of traditional party candidates in each autonomous community is primarily focused on three rational elements. In the case of Castilla y León, these three elements are distributed equally. In the case of Andalusia, the trio of consistency, knowledge, and confidence is maintained in 40% of the cases

In contrast, the candidates of the new parties do not exhibit any common elements. In the case of the new parties in Castilla y León, concrete data represents the most common category of rational content, accounting for 50% of the total. In Andalusia, knowledge represents the most common category, accounting for 45.9% of the total. In contrast to Castilians and Leonese, Andalusians evince an appeal to justice, as evidenced by a 5.4% response.

4 Discussion

The data analyzed in this research focus on the two elections that took place in 2022 in Spain, a country with one of the most pronounced polarization levels in the world (Gidron et al., 2020), specifically the elections in Castilla y León and Andalusia. Both elections possess distinctive characteristics, yet they both inaugurate a new electoral cycle in Spain. Additionally, they build upon existing research conducted on both Castilla y León and Andalusia

	Traditional (CYL)	New (CYL)	Traditional (AND)	New (AND)
Regional Leaders/Politicians	20	30.3		24
Regional Parties/Assoc.	36.4	50.8	56.8	35.4
Regional Gov.	20		20	
National Leaders/Politicians	23.6			
National parties/Assoc.				
National Gov.				
Foreign Leaders				
Foreign Gov.				
Foreign Economical Institutions				
National Media				
Regional Media				
Regural National People				
Unions/Lobbies/Companies				

FIGURE 6
Negative content's objectives. Source: Own elaboration based on data from Pérez-Castaños et al. (2024).

	Traditional (CYL)	New (CYL)	Traditional (AND)	New (AND)
Regional Leaders/Politicians	50	40.6	33.3	33.3
Regional Parties/Assoc.	50	43.8	53.3	22.2
Regional Gov.				
Regional Media				
National Leaders/Politicians				
National parties/Assoc.				
National Gov.				
oreign Leaders				
Regural National People				18.5

FIGURE 7
Satiric content's objectives. Source: Own elaboration based on data from Pérez-Castaños et al. (2024).

(González-Castro, 2023; Montabes Pereira et al., 2023; Ortega, 2023; Pérez-Castaños and Ruiloba-Núñez, 2023; Pérez-Castaños et al., 2023; Zarauza-Castro and Méndez-Muros, 2024).

The results of the analysis permit an examination of the content of social networks, thereby enabling the substantiation or refutation of the hypotheses set forth in the methodological section of this study. About the initial hypothesis, it was anticipated that the X accounts of the candidates representing the recently established political parties would demonstrate greater activity than those representing the more established parties. Indeed, the

data presented in Figure 1 substantiates the veracity of this hypothesis, as over two-thirds of the posts examined originated from candidates representing political parties categorized as "new parties." In this regard, the findings align with the postulates put forth by Peña and Gold (2023), which suggest that parties situated at the ideological extremes tend to have a more pronounced presence on social networks. Similarly, it is not uncommon for traditional parties with a long history to have a lesser presence on social networks, or at the very least, a presence that differs from that of new parties (Pérez-Castaños et al., 2022).

	Traditional (CYL)	New (CYL)	Traditional (AND)	New (AND)
Entertainment				
Anger				
Compassion				
Empathy		32.6	23	
Enthusiasm	77.8	28.3	34.4	29.6
Pride			23	
Sadness				
Wellbeing				40.8
Other				

FIGURE 8 Type of emotional content. Source: Own elaboration based on data from Pérez-Castaños et al. (2024).

Type of rational content. Source: Own elaboration based on data from Pérez-Castaños et al. (2024)

	Traditional (CYL)	New (CYL)	Traditional (AND)	New (AND)
Competency	33.3	16.7		24.3
Data	33.3	50		18.9
Consistency	33.3	16.7	40	
Justice				
Knowledge		16.7	40	45.9
Trust			20	

The second hypothesis aimed to further examine the notion that traditional political parties tend to exhibit a lower degree of personalization in comparison to their newer counterparts. The specialized literature indicates that the presence of broad and consolidated party structures in most of the national territory allows traditional parties to reduce their dependence on the figure of their leaders (Scott and Rains, 2020). In this regard, our data, in alignment with the findings of Pérez-Castaños and Ruiloba-Núñez (2023), illustrate that the social media accounts of the leaders of the new parties exhibit a markedly higher degree of hyper leadership. Similarly, it facilitates comprehension of the manner in which the nascent parties that emerged in the wake of the Great Recession may have aligned with the leadership communication pillar (Bb) put forth by Fitzpatrick (2021) when examining the migration of political parties to the digital domain. Figure 2 lends further support to this hypothesis, with a difference of approximately 20 percentage points in favor of the new political parties. Moreover, the leaders of this category of party tend to field more opposing candidates or, alternatively, candidates who oppose their opponents. This phenomenon coincides with the observation that the accounts

of candidates from new parties tend to feature a greater prevalence of attack content, particularly in the case of Castilla y León. This negative attitude may be due to the fact that, as mentioned above, the PP dominated the regional elections in Castilla y León, so the new parties are trying to differentiate themselves in a more aggressive way.

While there are no specific hypotheses regarding the straightforward expression and attire of leaders, these elements are nonetheless significant aspects for the analysis of electoral campaigns (Petersson McIntyre, 2021). Similarly, it is crucial to assess the visual presentation of these leaders, both collectively and individually, as it shapes the public image associated with attributes such as seriousness, managerial competence, and proximity to the electorate (Boussalis et al., 2021). Figure 3 illustrates that leaders of new parties tend to appear in a more casual manner. In the case of Castilla y León, 41.9% of candidates adhere to this style, while in Andalusia, the figure rises to 48.8%. This finding aligns with the criteria previously established by Duerksen and Elias (2018), who observed a tendency for extreme left-wing and, on occasion, extreme right-wing parties to present their candidates in a more approachable and informal manner through

TABLE 3 Emotional vs. rational content.

Type of pol. party (region)	Emotional	Rational	Neutral
Traditional (CYL)	36.8%	10.5%	52.6%
New (CYL)	58.5%	9.4%	32.1%
Traditional (AND)	83.8%	13.5%	2.7%
New (AND)	39.4%	26.0%	34.6%

Source: Own elaboration.

their attire. As these parties are considered "new parties," the effect is therefore proven.

Regarding facial expression, the postulates follow those previously advanced by Duerksen and Elias (2018). The candidates of traditional parties tend to appear more neutral and humorous, while those of new parties appear more concerned and smiling. However, the differences in the cases are minimal and should not be generalized. This finding is consistent with the results reported by Bast (2021), who observed that radical populist right-wing parties attempt to project a professional image on social media.

The third hypothesis sought to test the hypothesis put forth by Pallarés-Navarro and Zugasti (2022), which suggests that radical parties will utilize a greater proportion of attack content, either through negative campaigning or satirical content. Notwithstanding the observation by García Hípola et al. (2021) that the utilization of humorous and/or satirical content is uncommon in electoral campaigns, the coded posts indicate the presence of such content, albeit in a limited capacity. Furthermore, the data demonstrate no discernible distinction between the examined party typologies. About the content of the hypothesis, it can be stated that it is only partially proven. This is the case in Castilla y León, but not in Andalusia. This reinforces the idea expressed earlier of the need to break with the traditional parties in Castilla y León, especially the PP. This phenomenon occurs in the presence of both negative and satirical content. Furthermore, no discernible patterns emerge regarding the targets of these attacks, which largely align with those observed in the X contents of the leaders of traditional and new parties. As Pérez-Castaños and Ruiloba-Núñez (2023) have observed, this may be since this type of party—especially those of the extreme right—have altered their dialectics to reach a larger audience (Borbáth and Gessler, 2023). This is done to maximize their chances of becoming a governing party by expanding their pool of voters.

The fourth and final hypothesis sought to ascertain whether the posts on X from candidates representing traditional political parties exhibited a heightened emotional content. This hypothesis was based on the postulates of Gidron et al. (2020), who identified Spain as one of the Western countries with the most polarized society. As with the preceding hypothesis, this one is partially confirmed. Regarding the deployment of emotional rhetoric in X, the candidates representing traditional political parties exhibit a greater proclivity for its use in Andalusia than in Castile and León, where the newer parties demonstrate a stronger tendency to employ such rhetoric. Undoubtedly, in the case of Castilla y León, the emotional tendency, combined with the negative content, is in line with the need to differentiate from the new parties. In the case of Andalusia, it is noteworthy that the traditional parties' resort to this type of rhetoric. This may be because the PSOE, as the hegemonic party in the region, and more recently the PP, want to maintain an emotional link with the electorate. However, the data in Figure 8 demonstrate a discernible trend between the two types of parties about the utilization of emotional language. Therefore, the candidates of traditional parties utilize exclusively positive emotions, whereas those of the new parties employ a greater range of positive emotions and incorporate negative emotions, such as anger and sadness, into their content.

5 Conclusion and further research

The analysis developed allows us to respond to the initial objective of this research, which was to verify whether there were differences in the strategy of the leaders of the new political parties compared to those of the traditional parties. In response to this question, it can be stated that not only are differences evident, but that these differences also manifest between the Autonomous Communities in which these parties compete. As previously discussed, it is evident that there are discrepancies in the utilization of digital tools by emerging political entities, which align with the equalization hypothesis proposed by Lilleker et al. (2011) and validated in other contexts. Nevertheless, a longitudinal analysis would be required to substantiate the assertion that this process can be confirmed in the Spanish case.

It is evident that most of the content in X originates from the candidates of the new parties, and traditional parties have yet to make significant inroads in this regard. A more thorough examination of other forms of content, such as the visibility of traditional party leaders in conventional media outlets like television, print journalism, and radio, could prove valuable in determining whether the intuition that traditional party leaders will be more prominent in these spaces holds true. Similarly, as postulated by the theoretical framework, the practice of personalization remains more prevalent in the newer political parties. Both elements have been demonstrated to be accurate and continue to support the previously described hypotheses.

However, regarding emotional content, the typology of these emotions and the negative and attack messages, the data are not as compelling as those presented in the previous section. The hypotheses have only been partially tested, and only in some of the regions under examination. Moreover, the hypotheses are not always confirmed in the same region, which would serve to reinforce the theoretical content and open new avenues of research. However, each hypothesis is confirmed in a differentiated manner. About the emotional content, the theory predicted that the new parties would evince greater emotionality and a proclivity towards negative emotions. However, this was observed only in the case of Castilla y León, with no evidence of the former or the latter in the other regions. This may be attributed to the fact that the new parties are attempting to expand their electoral base, as Borbáth and Gessler (2023) have examined in the context of Hungary. Nevertheless, it is evident that the emotional register is more diverse in the case of the X-posts of the candidates of the new parties. This could constitute a promising avenue for future research, with several scholars already

venturing to explore this terrain (Giannopoulou, 2024). Negative messages were more prevalent in Castilla y León than in Andalusia across all party typologies. Internally, the differences are minimal in both territories. However, in the case of the candidates of the new parties, they employ satirical or humorous content more extensively, a practice observed exclusively in Castilla y León. It bears noting that this type of action is not particularly prevalent in the electoral campaigns analyzed in this article, nor is it a common feature of the broader Spanish political landscape.

It is evident that this analysis raises several questions that require further investigation and clarification. The initial question pertains to the counter tendencies of the emotional electoral campaign in Castilla y León, which does not align with the theoretical expectations. The second question pertains to the verification of these same inverse tendencies in the Andalusian case, specifically regarding the use of a negative and attacking campaign. As previously stated, this could signify a shift in the political landscape, potentially influencing the emergence of new parties that are perceived as capable of leading the government or, at the very least, becoming influential political partners within their respective electoral arenas.

Another factor that warrants further examination is the gender of the communicator, with the aim of determining whether this variable affects the way in which citizens perceive the information disseminated on social networks. In this regard, Ruiloba Núñez et al. (2022) consider this aspect relevant, demonstrating that persistent stereotypes about the qualities attributed to each gender continue to exert influence. While there have been studies that address the perceived differences between female and male leadership and have introduced concepts such as the "feminization" of politics, the authors argue that there are no intrinsic characteristics of the female gender that define it as a differentiated group in terms of communication and legislation. This conclusion does not negate the possibility that specific behaviors may be more prevalent among women, though not exclusively so. It is therefore more accurate to categorize them as distinct actors rather than grouping them solely based on their gender (Ruiloba Núñez and Valenzuela Samaniego, 2021). This is particularly relevant since the study of the candidates from Castilla y León included only male participants.

A third line of study that may be worthy of further investigation is the potential for additional elements to enhance the appeal of messages. This could include the use of emoticons, stickers, GIFs, and even hashtags, all of which are commonly employed on platforms such as X. These elements not only facilitate the dissemination of messages but also influence communication by conveying emotions that can complement or even contradict the textual content of messages on X. Furthermore, attempting to link the emotional content to the various topics of content posted on networks could also be a fruitful avenue of exploration. In this regard, several studies, including those by Zarauza-Castro and Méndez-Muros (2024) and Pérez-Castaños and Antón-Merino (2023), have attempted to examine this phenomenon. The former focused on the Andalusian elections, which are the subject of this research, while the latter investigated the populist radical right in the context of the 2019 European elections.

A fourth line of research, which is particularly worthy of attention, would be linked to the alignment of each of these political parties with the five-pillar model proposed by Fitzpatrick (2021). Although some clear trends emerge from the data analysed, a detailed longitudinal analysis of the political parties' communication strategies would

be required to gain a full understanding of their approach, going beyond the analysis of content generated during the electoral campaign. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to expand the scope to encompass the diverse accounts of political parties, where aspects pertaining to recruitment, public image, policy programmes, and other relevant factors could be investigated.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that there are discrepancies in the utilization of X, contingent on whether the candidates belong to parties with a lengthy political history or, conversely, have a relatively brief history. Nevertheless, it is evident that the distinctions between the two categories of parties are becoming increasingly subtle. Therefore, despite the extensive study of electoral campaigns in the social sciences, particularly political science, it appears that a superficial examination of campaign materials and social media posts suggests that we can teach new tricks to old dogs.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found at: https://zenodo.org/records/13624697?tok en=eyJhbGciOiJIUzUxMiJ9.eyJpZCI6IjY4NDVmYzQ1LWJIYTAtND AyMS04Njg4LTM1NWQxOTEwZjU3ZSIsImRhdGEiOnt9LCJyYW5 kb20iOiIwMThjYTliOWUwNjUyZjkwMzY2Nzk2Mzc5YzAyY2M4M SJ9.H47XACaII54MM9B2vM5A_exvdTAe-QFHJcKBqmUjSv24ZM JldBWDPQl9-DeJ0LwRSe6VKctEV2ZUBgh3308hOg.

Author contributions

SP-C: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JA-M: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing. GG-H: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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